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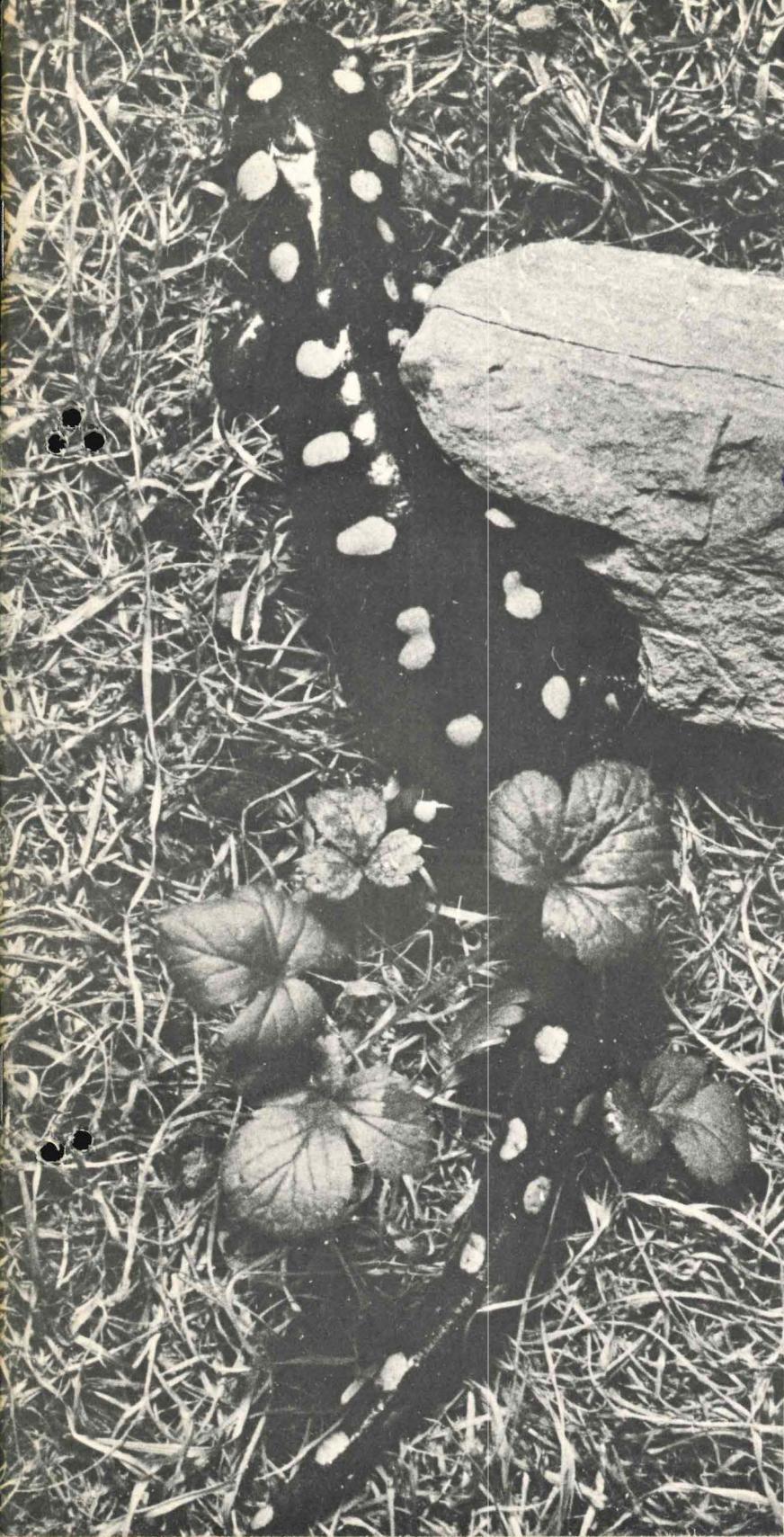
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# Thames Science Center

Naturelist  
Notebook

STACKS

APRIL  
1969





# NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

APRIL 1969

VOLUME V

NO. 4

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Front Cover: "Spotted Salamander"  
Photo by J. Walker

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# APRIL

## The Month Of Spring Wildflowers

April is the month of Spring Wild-flowers. Many of our favorite flowers come up early in the season. In our backyards we find such familiar garden flowers as daffodils, crocuses, and tulips.

The woodlands also send up many of their flowers in April and some of these can be found if you look for them. Locally difficult to find, but one of our prettiest, most popular, and first flowering plants is the Trailing Arbutus or Mayflower. People often try to pick the flowers of this plant and find in doing so that they often uproot the whole plant! It should, therefore, be left alone.



*Photo by R. Dewire*

Another handsome flower to come up now is called Bloodroot. This plant gets its name from the red juice which looks like blood that comes out of its root when it is broken. The white flowers are very fragile and only last a day or so. The petals blow off quickly in a strong wind.

In the marshes we find a bright yellow flower coming up in many places. It is called Marsh Marigold or Cowslips. People often take the greens and boil them for a vegetable.



Photo by R. Dewire

We have several kinds of trilliums in our area but the one that comes up this month is probably the prettiest. It is called the Purple Trillium. The deep purple flowers have an unpleasant smell to them and it attracts insects that normally feed on rotting meat. It is a beautiful sight when one finds a wooded area with several dozen of these plants growing together.

There are several other flowers including Trout Lily, Hepatica, and Wood Anenomes that will be out in April. Watch for them and phone the Center with the date of any that you find in flower.

# APRIL'S CALENDAR

April is the month of warming days, flowers, and house wrens.

April 1 . . . April Fools' Day -- don't let anyone fool you!

April 2 . . . The Full Moon called the Pink Moon.

April 4 . . . Horse tails have pushed up in dry areas -- often around buildings.

April 7 . . . The first of the spring warblers--the Palm Warbler -- arrives.

April 10 . . . Trailing Arbutus in flower on wooded slopes.

April 12 . . . Forsythia bushes turn bright yellow as they flower.

April 17 . . . Chipping Sparrows sing from tree tops and telephone wires.

April 18 . . . Bloodroot, Hepatica and Dutchman's Breeches are all in flower.

April 20 . . . Warm sunny days bring Blacksnakes out of their dens.

April 20 . . . Barn Swallows arrive from the South to begin nesting.

April 21 . . . Purple Trillium, Foamflowers and Wild Ginger add their flowers to the beauty of the woodlands.

April 23 . . . Jack-in-the-Pulpits in flower--a very early date. See if you can find an earlier one this year.

April 24 . . . The tiny Ruby-crowned kinglet returns from the South.

April 27 . . . Daylight Savings Time begins--Make sure your clocks are set ahead one hour.

April 29 . . . Chimney Swifts catch insects at twilight over the cities.

April 30 . . . Black-and-white and Parula Warbler arrivals signal the start of the great warbler migration to come next month.

# TALES FROM PEQUOT HILL

by TRUDY GARDNER

The birds were chirping this morning and making such a racket that they woke up Mr. Woodchuck who had been sleeping through the cold winter at Pequot Hill.

He stuck his head out of the burrow to make sure it was safe to venture out. Finally, he made his entrance with a big stretch. Looking rather peculiar in appearance with his thick brown coat and roundish ears and eyes full and bright, he made a contented grunting noise to let the others in the colony know he had awakened.

The first thing on Mr. Woodchuck's mind was a tasty meal. He had just spent the entire winter living off the fat stored in his body. His last meal was probably way back in October.

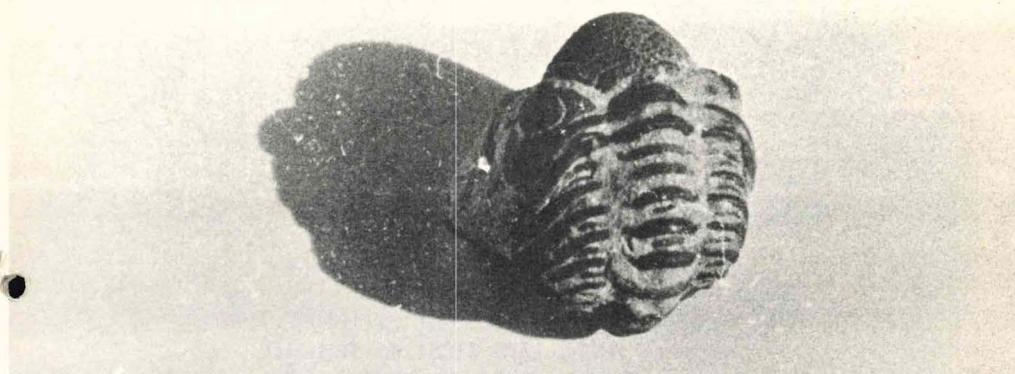
Hurriedly, he made his way to the nearby field where he sought the tender shoots of the new grasses and clover.

It is surely one of the most comical of sights to see Mr. Woodchuck running across the field -- he really doesn't walk or run but waddles along as fast as he can.

Soon Mr. Woodchuck will look for a wife and by early summer we should see several young woodchucks or chucklings, as they are called, on Pequot Hill.

# ROCK HOUNDS

by JERRY THEILER



*Photo by J. Walker*

## TRILOBITES

Trilobites are odd animals that lived and became extinct hundreds of millions of years ago. They are called trilobites because they have a three-lobed body or a body with three main parts.

A hard covering, very similar to the covering on a lobster or a crab, covered their entire body. Joints in this hard outer skeleton allowed them to move (like lobsters.) Most trilobites have large compound eyes (eyes made up of many smaller eyes), and a body made of small segments.

The trilobite lived in salt water and some plowed or burrowed through the sand and mud in search of food. A few were swimmers and crawlers, but the majority were burrowers.

Trilobites are important to modern man as an index fossil. An index fossil is a fossil that can help give a scientist an idea of the age of a rock that it is found in. Since trilobites changed greatly with passing centuries a scientist can estimate the rock's age if a particular trilobite is found in it.

# THE TURTLE

*A Story for the Hands to Tell*



This is a turtle egg,  
Round and white.



This is the turtle nest,  
Hidden from sight.



This is the sand,

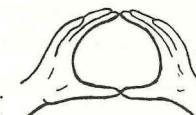
Where the nest is found.



This is the pond,  
The sand goes around.



This is the sun,  
That hatches out the egg.



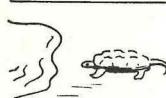
This is the little turtle,  
Coming leg by leg.



This is the way,  
The little turtle crawls.



He takes several steps,  
And then he falls.

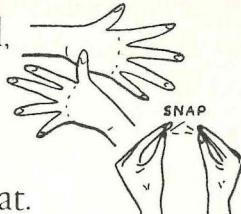


His life in the water,  
Is about to begin.



He crawls to the pond,  
And quickly dives in.

This is the pond weed,  
That little turtles eat.



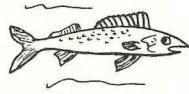
This is the crayfish,  
The turtle eats for meat.



This is the mud,  
Where the little turtle hides.



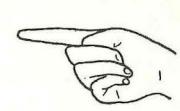
From the big fish,  
Whose mouth opens wide.



The little turtle's shell,  
Begins to grow and grow.



And soon is a,  
Big turtle, you know.



The turtle's tail,  
Has grown long and fat.



The turtle's jaws,  
Are sharp and they snap.

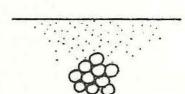


And now we know,  
The turtle's name.



It's a snapping turtle,  
The very same,

As the one that laid,  
The egg white and round,



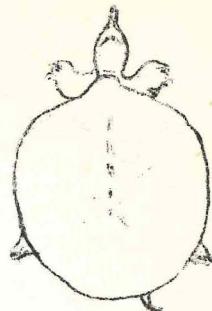
In the turtle nest,  
Hidden in the sandy ground.

by Lester E. Harris, Jr

# PET CORNER

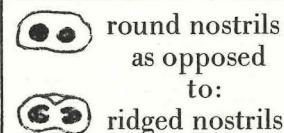
by DAVE RICHARDS

Smooth Softshell



An engaging little turtle is the Smooth Softshell Turtle. He is as ferocious as he can be for his size (generally from 5-14 inches) and vigorously attacks anything within reach with his claws and mandibles. The larger softshells demand respect, but the bite of smaller ones resemble only a slight pinch. As their name implies, their shells are quite soft and bend easily.

The Smooth Softshell is the only one of his family that does not have any spines or bumps on the carapace (the upper shell). They have round nostrils, as opposed to the ridged nostrils of all the other softshells. The carapace is usually brown or olive; the plastron (bottom shell) is a paler shade of the same color.



The Smooth Softshell inhabits rivers and streams, ranging from Pennsylvania to New Mexico. They are completely aquatic, leaving the water only to bask in the sun for brief periods. My little softshell frequently hides in the plants in the tank with only his eyes and snout above water. In Nature they often lie buried in the mud in shallow water with their long neck extended to expose eyes and nostrils for breathing.

The turtle enjoys live fresh food, such as small minnows, worms and snails. They are mainly meat eaters, but will occasionally eat small amounts of water plants. A word of caution to someone planning to buy one: They should be put in a tank of their own. If put in with fish, it may eat them all!



## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S DESK . . . .

We welcome notice of Conservation activities or problems for inclusion in this section of the Naturalist's Notebook. . . . Please let us know of your local activity so that others may be aware of your efforts and lend their support where possible. . . .

**WHOOPING CRANES:** This year 50 whooping cranes are spending the winter in Texas. It is the largest number of these birds to be recorded since they were at their low of 15 in 1941. Six of the birds are young-of-the-year. In addition, there are 18 birds in captivity.

**AUDUBON WILDLIFE FILM:** The final Audubon Wildlife Film of the season will be held on Sunday afternoon, April 27th, at 3:00 P.M. at Clarke Center, Mitchell College. Buzz Moss will present his film "Mule Deer Country." Guest tickets for this program will be available at the door.

**TERN OBSERVATIONS NEEDED:** As a continuation of the Tern Study conducted on the nesting terns on Great Gull Island by the American Museum of Natural History and the Linnaean Society of New York, local people are once again asked to look for terns with colored bands on their legs. Each tern has 3 bands of different colors and one aluminum band -- two on each leg. A total of 1,839 terns were banded in 1967 and 1968. This summer, in addition to leg banding, the birds will also be marked with dye to enable observers to spot them in flight. Red, yellow, blue and black dyes will be used and the coloring applied to the birds' back just above the tail or on the breast or wings. . . . Observations of the dyed birds will indicate where the birds from the island feed and more about the extent of their post-breeding dispersal from July to October. If you see a banded bird, read the bands on the left leg first, then the right leg from top to bottom. Last year observers noted a number of these terns at the mouth of the Thames River, Saybrook and Point Judith. All sightings of banded or dyed birds can be reported to the Thames Science Center, 622 Williams Street, New London -- Phone 443-4295.

BLUEBIRDS: People who get their electric service from the Hartford Electric Light Company got a little bonus in with their bills for February. Enclosed with it was a pamphlet entitled "Let's Try to Restore Connecticut's Bluebird Population." In addition to interesting information about the bluebird, there is a plan for building a bluebird house that is quite simple yet very good. Members who do not have one of these and would like it may pick one up at the Science Center at no cost.

OIL POLLUTION: In the wake of the oil disaster at Santa Barbara, a committee was formed there to try and get something done about the situation. The name of the group is GOO, which stands for Get Oil Out. They are seeking nationwide support for their plight and are asking for all who are interested and want to help them to write them expressing support. There are three goals they are striving for:

1. Taking immediate action to have present offshore oil operations cease and desist.
2. Issuing no further leases in the Santa Barbara Channel.
3. Having all oil platforms and rigs removed from this area at the earliest possible date.

If you agree with these goals, write to: GET OIL OUT (GOO) Committee of Santa Barbara, 921 Anacapa St., Santa Barbara, Calif. 93101 stating that you do. The more support they get, the more successful their pleas will be.

TIDAL MARSHERS: The Old Lyme Conservation Commission has put out an excellent booklet entitled "Tidal Marshes of Old Lyme Connecticut." It is a primer about the plants that grow in our wetlands and stresses the importance of conserving these areas. Copies of this are available at the Science Center to our members.

# YOUR OWN NATURE JAUNT *by BOB DEWIRE*

## TO A WOODLAND EDGE

Many of spring's first arrivals may be found in the area of habitat known as the edge. This is the place where the tall trees of a woodland end and either a shrub area or a field area begins. It is a good place to find many animals and plants on an April walk.

A reason for much activity here is the exposure to the open sunlight which warms the area rapidly and gives rise to many insects which are sought by many of the birds that have migrated up from the South. Plants also benefit from the warming sun and here we often find some of our early flowering species.

Walking through an area such as this on a warm April day, one is often surprised at just how many things can be found. For the amateur botanist, the trailing arbutus will often grow at the edge and its fragrant flowers are always a highlight of spring. The little bluets are out and in some areas there will be blankets of these flowers. Often mixed in with them will be a few small early-flowering violets. Fiddleheads of cinnamon, hay-scented, interrupted, and other ferns will be starting to unroll and add their greenery to early spring.

For the herpetologist this is a good area to watch for spring's first snakes. The warm sun brings activity to these cold-blooded creatures. The common garter snake and handsome blacksnake are two species that may be out warming themselves on a rock or seeking food. Red-backed salamanders may scurry away as you turn over a rock or log.



If the area is moist a few spring peepers can be heard all through the day.

Birders search this habitat for new arriving birds that are insect eaters. The brown thrasher and catbird both prefer thicket and brushy areas as does the towhee. A sharp, scolding sound out of a bush may reveal the first tiny house wren of the year. Barn swallows skim along the edge catching insects and the phoebe will dart out from its perch to do the same. A broad-winged hawk may sit on a tree branch overlooking the open area as he watches for a little mouse or vole to run into the open.

If it's mammals you want to see then the edge has creatures other than voles and mice. If the woods goes directly into a field a woodchuck or two may be watching you. Their holes are often right where the first trees of the edge begin. Chipmunks and gray squirrels both will be active here. A thicket area is a good place to watch for cottontail rabbits. It will take sharp eyes and a little luck to locate the den of another edge inhabitant -- the red fox. It is even harder to see the wily animal itself!

Walk along a woodland edge in April. The springtime activity here will make it an enjoyable trip indeed.

# CONNECTICUT CREATURES

by MIKE WALKER

My first encounter with a Great Horned Owl occurred when I was nine years old and it left a strong impression with me. The season was late winter and I was walking along a rocky ridge through the woods near our house. The ridge was high enough to put me nearly even with the tops of trees growing on the slopes below, and narrow enough so that the nearest trees were not more than twenty or thirty feet away.

At one point I was on my hands and knees creeping around the base of a huge boulder that nearly crowded the trail off the ridge. Just then I happened to glance up. There, not more than a few yards from my saucer-eyes was the largest, meanest looking bird I had ever seen. Its massive, brown feathered body was sitting on a stick nest near the top of one of the hillside trees. As I looked up, the big bird swiveled a head as big as my own, fixed me with an unblinking yellow-eyed glare, and demanded in a booming bass voice, "HOO-HOO, HOO, HOO-HOO?" I fled back down the trail, stumbling, sweating, and convinced that at any moment I would feel the great bird's talons through my shoulder blades.

The demon of my youth is scarcely less impressive when examined with a bit of scientific detachment. Strongest and fiercest of our owls, the Great Horned Owl is regarded by many experts as the most aggressive North American Bird of Prey. These fearless "Flying Tigers" have been known to drive hawks off their nests and take them over, and make an occasional meal of a full grown cat. The adult bird may be nearly two feet long, with a wingspread approaching five feet. As is the case with most birds of prey, the female is

larger than the male.

In January and February these owls begin to call regularly, usually from forested, uninhabited areas. The usual call is a series of bass-voiced "Hoos," although the bird is capable of a wide range of cries, including a piercing scream that is said to be one of the most unsettling noises of the woods.

The Horned Owl is our earliest nesting bird. Eggs are usually laid in an appropriated crow or squirrel nest by late February. After the young hatch, they remain in the ~~nest~~ nest for over a month, and a feeding them becomes the first concern of both parents.

Rats, rabbits, and mice are among the owl's favored items of diet, but the bird can take animals as large as woodchucks, opossums, geese, and turkeys. Great Horned Owls also have an odd predilection for skunks. The skunk's spray defenses are no protection against the owl, and naturalists report that many of the Great Horned Owls they have collected have a strong odor of skunk.

In Connecticut and elsewhere throughout its range, the Great Horned Owl is a year round resident.



Photo by J. Walker

# FIELD NOTES

Feb. 15 -- March 15

COMMON REDPOLLS are the news of this period. After announcing in last month's newsletter that there were scarce reports of these birds, they suddenly showed up throughout the area. Reports of the Redpolls are present from all the regions these field notes cover. Numbers ranged from one bird to over 30.

Saybrook, Old Lyme and East Lyme: A flock of 47 HORNED LARKS was seen in Saybrook. Eight RING-NECKED DUCKS are on the Lieutenant River and CANADA GEESE are increasing in numbers along Great Island prior to migrating. The RED-HEADED WOODPECKER is still present at Rocky Neck through this period.

Waterford and New London: SKUNK CABBAGE flowers were out on March 15 and SNOWDROPS were in flower on Mar. 11th. Owls were of interest during this period with the strange sighting of 4 GREAT HORNED OWLS sitting in a tree near the entrance to the Waterford Town Beach on Great Neck Road on Feb. 17th. On the 18th three birds were there and they disappeared after that. A small SAW-WHET OWL was seen being scolded by CHICKADEES in a grove of spruces on Shore Road near Magonk Point on March 2nd. A RED-SHOULDERED HAWK is regularly seen in trees along I95 near Waterford Airport. Ducks of interest include two GADWALL at Harkness Memorial Park on March 9th and a drake REDHEAD in Smith's Cove on the 8th. A LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE was seen feeding on a bird behind the S & H Green Stamp Store in New London on March 6th. At Magonk Point, the WOODCOCK began performing on March 14th.

Groton, Mystic, and Stonington: A HARBOR SEAL was

seen several times during the period around Wamphassuc Point in Stonington. A CHIPMUNK was out at the Peace Sanctuary on March 6th and was caught 4 times in the bird banding traps on March 9th. GRAY SQUIRRELS were gathering nesting materials at the Sanctuary on March 7th. The rare and very difficult to identify HOARY REDPOLL was reported at two locations. One was at Jupiter Point on Feb. 15 and the other was at Darling Hill in Stonington on the 22nd. Two SNOW BUNTINGS were at Ender's Island on Feb. 28th. Birds indicating spring is approaching included up to 200 BRANT gathering between Stonington and Napatree Point on March 9th, FLICKERS singing at the Peace Sanctuary on March 8th and RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS singing in Stonington on March 12th. The two rarest finds of the period were reports of three WHISTLING SWANS moving between Latimer Point and Lord's Point the week of March 2nd, and an unbelievable OVENBIRD coming to a feeder area at Wamphassuc Point in Stonington since March 2nd.

Rhode Island Shoreline: Both RED-NECKED GREBES and an EARED GREBE were at Point Judith through this period. At Galilee, an ICELAND GULL and two GLAUCOUS GULLS have been present through the period. A HARLEQUIN DUCK was at Quonochontaug on Feb. 15th and Napatree Point had a SHORT-EARED OWL and two BLACK-BELLIED PLOVERS present on a very windy March 8th. Double-crested CORMORANTS arrived at Watch Hill on March 13th.

Contributors to this column were: Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Bates, Grace Bissell, Lawrence Brooks, Bob and Mary Jean Dewire, John Gardner, Rick Holloway, Sam and Katy Knox, Rey Larson, Margaret MacGregor, Ruth Newcomb, Billy Ryan, Eloise Saunders, Trudy Smith, and Michael Walker.

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**The Interpretive Museum of 622 Williams Street, New London, Connecticut 06320**  
**The Peace Sanctuary Nature Preserve At 200 River Road, Mystic, Connecticut 06355**

**The Thames Science Center  
Presents Its First Annual  
*NATURE FESTIVAL***

 **Saturday, May 17 10:00 to 5:00  
Sunday, May 18 1:00 to 5:00**

*Spend the weekend with us  
enjoying Spring out-of-doors in  
the Connecticut Arboretum.*

*Field Trips  
Demonstrations*

*Tours*

*Exhibits  
Children's Programs*

 *Watch for a Special Brochure  
coming to you soon with more details.*

*In the meantime, be sure and reserve these  
two dates in May- - - - -*

\*Volunteer help is needed for tickets and serving refreshments.  
Interested persons are asked to call the Science Center.

# NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

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**THAMES SCIENCE CENTER**

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John F. Gardner  
*Editor*

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STRIPED SKUNK by Audubon Wildlife Film Photographer Albert J. Wool. Be sure and come to the final Wildlife Film of the season on April 27th.

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